

English and Mandarin Serial or Non-serial Verb Constructions

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Abstract

This paper addresses serial verb constructions (SVCs) in English and Mandarin. Although Mandarin and English is different in the total number of SVC types, three so-called SVC types are found to be common across English and Mandarin: purposive SVCs (e.g. go eat); causative SVCs (e.g. I made him laugh); perceptive SVCs (e.g. I saw him laugh). This paper has demonstrated typical SVCs have unique features distinct from typical subordinate or coordinate constructions. This study proposes three semantic criteria to distinguish SVCs from non-SVCs. Based on the three criteria, this study shows that purposive constructions are considered a canonical SVC type while perceptive constructions are not a typical SVC and may be better to be analyzed as subordinate constructions. This study also provides reasons for Mandarin to have more SVCs: differences of lexicalization between English and Mandarin; lacking of syntactic markers and inflections in Mandarin and frequent pronoun dropping in Mandarin.

Keyword: Serial verb constructions; Event Structure, English; Mandarin

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the term serial verb construction refers to a sequence of verbs or verb phrases in a sentence in which there is no intervening conjunction. The English expression *go eat*, for example, might be considered as a kind of serial verb construction since there is no infinitive or other morphosyntactic marker present to indicate a coordinating or subordinating relationship between the two verbs *go* and *eat*.

English is traditionally termed as a non-serial language; however, this does not suggest that in English there is no serial verb construction (SVC). Mandarin is classified as a serial language; however, according to the results obtained from the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese only one out of five sentences contains serial verbs though Mandarin is thought to have high frequency in serial verbs. In fact, the issue of serial or non-serial language is basically a matter of frequency.

In the literature, there are quite a few studies on Mandarin SVCs (e.g. Chao 1968, Li & Thompson 1981; Liu 1991, Chang 1990, Chan 1998, Yin 2010) while there are few studies on English SVCs. Comparative studies on English and Mandarin SVCs have yet to be explored. The present study will investigate English and Mandarin SVCs to fill these gaps. This paper will also examine event structure and unique features of SVCs, subordinate and coordinate constructions to distinguish these three types of constructions.*

*The abbreviations used in the paper are the following: PERF=perfective, PROG=progressive, CL=classifier, 3SG=third person singular.

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1. Common Types of VV Sequence in English and Mandarin

Although Mandarin and English is different in the total number of SVC types the following three types of VV sequence are found to be common across English and Mandarin:

- (1) Purposive SVC
 - a. *go eat* (English)
 - b. *qu chifan* (Mandarin)
'go eat'
- (2) Causative SVC
 - a. *I made him laugh.* (English)
 - b. *Wo shi ta xiao.* (Mandarin)
I make him laugh
'I made him laugh.'
- (3) Perceptive SVC
 - a. *I saw him laugh* (English)
 - b. *Wo kan ta youyong.* (Mandarin)
I see he swim
'I saw him swim'

However, it has been noticed that not any VV sequence or multi-verb structure can be regarded as an SVC. For lack of agreed-upon defining criteria, different linguists have given different classifications to these structurally similar constructions. Some analyses only reveal some aspects of SVCs and others include irrelevant structures such as coordination as SVCs. So this study aims at categorizing and understanding the constructions that have been called serial verb constructions at one time or another. In so doing, I hope to provide a unified account of both Mandarin and English multi-verb constructions. But before presenting my analysis to achieve this goal, it would be helpful to provide brief discussions about event structure.

2. Definition of 'Conceptual Event'

Since my approach proposes that there is a connection between grammatical structure and cognition such that one can link a canonical SVC to a single (or unitary) complex event, it is important to provide a tenable definition of 'event'. Events can be simple or complex depending on how many phases they contain and on how the speaker conceptualizes the event. Simple events only consist of a single phase while complex events contain more than one phase. Whether simple or complex, all events have a core component – the main activity – which is usually highlighted and salient. If an event is only composed of a core verbal component it is deemed a simple event, as in (4).

- (4) *Ta zai sha yi zhi zhu.*
3SG PROG kill one CL pig
'S/he was killing a pig (the pig might or might not die).'

However, in addition to the main element (the activity phase), an event could be construed to have an inception phase and/or termination phase, with the former serving as a preparatory stage and the latter usually signaling a resultative stage of the main activity. Thus, one verb can signal the core phase of an event while another verb can allude to an onset or outcome phase. If more than one phase is involved and expressed in the event, it necessarily becomes a complex event.

- (5) *Ta na dao sha yizhi zhu.*
3SG take knife killone CL pig
'S/he took a knife to kill a pig.'

Example (5) is construed as a complex event with two purposively related phases or stages and, thus, it is considered as an SVC.

An action or an activity can cause a termination, fulfillment, or change of state—that is, a result. An action and its result can form a macro event (Talmy 2000). For example, the death of a poisonous snake could be the result of some action. People could kill a snake by taking some action such as beating or striking it.

Speakers can choose sentence forms to reflect the construal of the event as having one or multiple phases that they wish to communicate. In Mandarin Chinese, the resultative phase of an event is often realized by an achievement verb like *si* ‘die’ as in (6).

- (6) *Ta sha si le yi zhi zhu.*
 3SG kill die PERF one CL pig
 ‘S/he killed a pig (the pig actually died).’

In addition to the core component, a description of an event could include both an inception phase and a termination phase as (7) illustrates.

- (7) *Tna dao sha si le yi zhi zhu.*
 3SG take knife kill die PERF one CL pig.
 ‘S/he took a knife and killed a pig.’

Almost all types of SVCs denote in varying degrees a unitary complex event and they consist of at least two phases of an event: the core phase and either an inception phase or a termination phase. In fact, some multi-verb sequences express a single event with multiple phases (two sub-events) under an umbrella of one macro event (Talmy 2000), while others do not, expressing instead two events each being construed to have only one phase. Table 1 illustrates the correspondence between different phases and event/construction types.

Table 1: Correspondence between Different Phases and Types of Events

Phases	Type of events
core phase	simple event –non-SVC
inception phase + core phase	complex event –SVC
core phase + termination phase	complex event –SVC
inception phase + core phase + termination phase	complex event –SVC
core phase + core phase	2 separate events–non-SVCs

In the literature, there has been much debate over whether SVCs involve coordinate structures or subordinate structures or both, that is, some are the former and others the latter (e.g., Li & Thompson 1973; Stewart 2001). However, a few linguists assert that SVCs are not typical coordinate or typical subordinate structures (Chao 1968; Langacker 1991; Song 1992), but no one has explained the differences between SVCs and coordination or subordination in detail. I propose that typical SVCs have unique features distinct from typical subordinate constructions or coordinate constructions. The differences mainly lie in their respective profiling.

3. Event Structure of Coordination, Subordination, and SVCs

In the literature, there has been much debate over whether SVCs involve coordinate structures or subordinate structures or both; that is, some analyses advocate for the former and others for the latter (e.g., Li & Thompson 1973; Stewart 2001). However, a few linguists assert that SVCs are not typical coordinate or typical subordinate structures (e.g., Chao 1968; Langacker 1991; Song 1992), but no one has explained the differences between SVCs and coordination or subordination in detail. This dissertation proposes that canonical SVCs have unique features distinct from typical subordinate constructions or coordinate constructions. The differences mainly lie in their respective event profiling – an aspect of construal (Langacker 1991).

As illustrated in the next series of diagrams, ovals will be used to represent individual events and line thickness to represent degree of profiling or cognitive salience. In typical coordinate constructions, as in (8) neither individual clausal profile overrides the other at the higher level of organization. The two clauses in this sentence are co-equal and they do not stand in a main clause/subordinate clause relationship. Thus, each clause has main clause status.

- (8) *Ta meitian duanlian shenti xuexi hanyu.*
 3SG everyday exercise body study Chinese
 ‘S/he exercises his/her body (and) studies Chinese everyday.’

In a typical case of coordination, each conjunct is separate and equally profiled, as indicated by the bold line in Figure 1. Therefore, typical coordinate constructions have two processual profiles (Langacker 1991). The two clauses in such constructions are independent and there is no situational inter-dependence between them. Very often, there is no temporal sequential relation between them either.

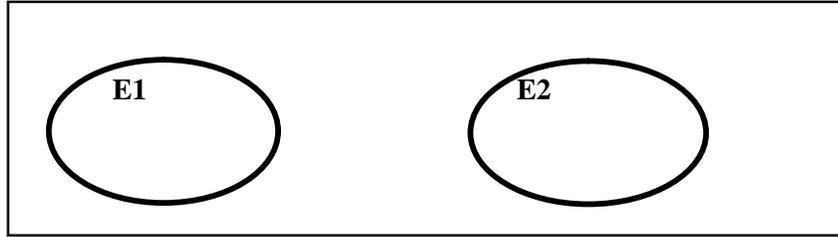


Figure 1: Event Structure of Coordination

By contrast, in a typical subordinate construction, there is usually only one main clause, as illustrated by the bold oval in Figure 2, in addition to a subordinate clause, as illustrated by the dotted oval. A main clause is the profile determinant and lends its profile to the composite structure of a multi-clausal expression (Langacker 1991: 436). A subordinate clause is defined as one “whose profile is overridden by that of a main clause” (Langacker 1991: 436) at the composite structure, represented in Figure 2 by the bigger oval which subsumes both E1 and E2.

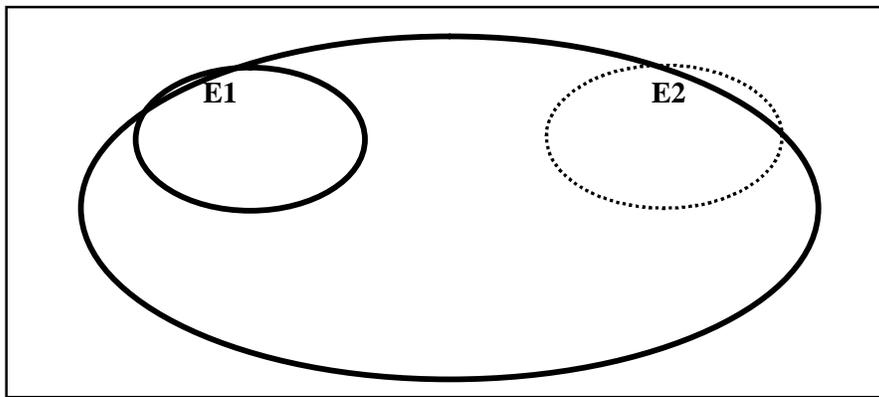


Figure 2: Event Structure of Subordination

In a typical complement or subordinate clause construction, the main clause and the subordinate clause combine directly. The main clause determines the profile of the overall structure as in (9). The sentence designates the process of confessing, not of doing something wrong.

- (9) *Ta chengren zuocuo le.*
 3SG confess do wrong PERF
 ‘He confessed that he had done something wrong.’

Finally, what is called a canonical SVC has its own characterization, distinct from the typical coordination and typical subordination cases (Langacker 1991). In canonical Mandarin SVCs, two or more content verbs (or phrases) of equal status are incorporated within a single clause. In Figure 3, both events are profiled as in the typical coordinate structure. However, there is situational inter-dependence between the two events, indicated by a bold line which connects them. As in the SVC *qu chi fan* ‘go eat a meal’, the two verbs represent successive temporal but interdependent phases. These two purposively related phases are construed to be one overall event represented by the bigger bold oval which subsumes both E1 and E2. Thus, typical SVCs profile a single process comprising two or more separately coded phases. These phases join to form a composite verb (or verb phrase) which acts as the profile determinant for a clause (Langacker 1991).



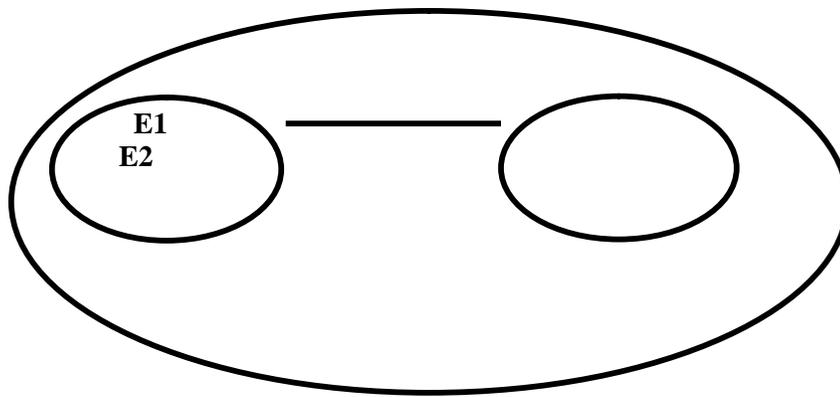


Figure 3: Event structure of an SVC

Cognitive Grammar provides useful mechanisms for describing differences between event structures such as coordination, subordination, and serialization. It enables us to discern the similarities and differences among them. In the examples just cited, each of these three general categories of constructions involves two events (or sub-events). The two events (or sub-events) are both profiled in coordinate constructions and in SVCs, since both (sub)-events are raised to a distinctive level of prominence in these two constructions. However, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 3, the two events in typical coordinate constructions are independent and there is no necessary semantic relation between them, while the two events in SVCs are semantically inter-dependent and are construed as two phases under the single umbrella of a macro event. A macro event is a kind of complex event since it consists of at least two phases. In subordinate constructions, as indicated in Figure 2, only one event denoted by the main event is profiled and the other event denoted by the subordinate clause is not profiled. This asymmetrical schema usually serves as a representation of complementation or modification relations.

4. Three Iconically Based Semantic Principles

The present analysis is largely based on iconicity in language. The basic assumption of the iconicity principle in language is that “linguistic forms are frequently the way they are because, like diagrams, they resemble the conceptual structure they are used to convey” (Haiman, 1985: 7). In other words, “grammatical structure is an iconic reflection of conceptual structure” (Newmeyer, 1992: 759). Take iconicity of Complexity as an example. “The idea that linguistic complexity reflects conceptual complexity has long been an important aspect of markedness theory. Marked forms and structures are typically both structurally more complex (and at least longer) and semantically more complex than unmarked ones” (Newmeyer, 1992: 763). Thus, Jakobson (1965: 29-30) observed that “in various Indo-European languages, the positive, comparative, and superlative degrees of adjectives show a gradual increase in the number of phonemes...There are languages where the plural forms are distinguished from the singular by an additional morpheme, whereas, according to Greengerg, there is no language in which this relation would be reserve”.

In order to capture all the characteristics of true Mandarin SVCs, a set of operational criteria which go beyond syntax are proposed in this paper. The theoretical grounding for classifying Mandarin SVCs is the following three iconically based semantic principles: **temporal sequence** and **scope** as first proposed in Tai (1985), **shared participants**, and **situational dependence**. These three semantic principles all play a role in construing Mandarin multi-verbal expressions.

4.1. Principle of Temporal Sequence and Scope

The Principle of Temporal Sequence, which is based on iconicity, holds that “the relative word order between two syntactic units is determined by the temporal order of the state which they represent in the conceptual world” (Tai, 1985:50). Chinese is a near isolating language with very few markers of tense and temporal relations. A lot of semantic functions are indicated by word order. Even without overt temporal markers, Chinese sentences can be interpreted appropriately and unambiguously because the default interpretation is based on the iconicity of temporal sequence (Chan, 1997). Therefore, in Mandarin SVCs, interpretation with regard to temporal sequence between two verbal phrases should be based on the linear order of these phrases.

- (10) a. *Ta mai piao jin qu.*
 3SG buy ticket enter go
 'He bought a ticket to go in.'
 b. *Ta jin qu mai piao.*
 3SG enter go buy ticket
 'He went in to buy a ticket.'
- (11) *Women jin dianyingyuan kan dianying.*
 We enter cinema see movie
 'We went into the cinema to see a film.'

The two VPs in (10) and (11) have a consecutive interpretation based on the iconicity principle of Temporal Sequence. In (10a), the subject first bought the ticket and only then would be allowed to go into the cinema while the alternate order in (10b) yields a different interpretation: the subject first went in and then it was possible for him to achieve the aim: buying a ticket. In sentence (11), in order to see a film "we" should first go into the cinema. Therefore, the linearity of the events in these two example sentences is determined by the temporal order of the state in the conceptual world: the first event must precede the second one. Moreover, if these two events are discrete the first one should be completed before the second one (Chan, 1998).

The Principle of Temporal Scope claims that "if the conceptual state represented by a syntactic unit X falls within the temporal scope of the conceptual state represented by a syntactic unit Y, the word order is YX" (Tai, 1985:60). If two VPs conform to the Principle of Temporal Scope they often suggest a circumstantial, if not purposive interpretation. Consider the following two examples:

- (12) *Women kai hui taolun nei ge wenti.*
 We open meeting discuss that CL problem
 'We discussed that problem in the meeting.'
- (13) *Ta shang ke xuexi yingyu.*
 3SG attend lesson learn English
 'S/he attended classes to learn English.'

In (12) and (13), the two events are dependent on each other in the sense that the second event is the direct consequence of the first and the second event occurs either simultaneously with the first or it falls within the temporal frame of the first. In sentence (12), the event X *taolun neige wenti* 'discuss that problem' occurs within the temporal scope of the event Y *kai hui* 'hold a meeting' and in sentence (13), the event X *xuexi yingyu* 'learn English' happens within the event Y *shang ke* 'attending lessons'. According to the Principle of Temporal Scope, a syntactic unit with a smaller temporal scope should follow the unit with a larger scope. This principle plays an important role in determining the linearity of verbs in SVCs having a circumstantial (also purposive) interpretation. The word order of the serial verbs in this type of SVC should abide by the principle of temporal scope. It follows that the first event serving as the circumstance has a larger temporal scope than the second verb phrase (Chan, 1997).

4. 2 Principle of Shared Participants

The Principle of Shared Participants, grounded on Iconicity of Distance, refers to the phenomenon in which two verbs share at least one participant. The shared participant(s) could be the subject or both the subject and the object in some cases. The omission of the participant(s) between two verb phrases could suggest closer relationship between them. Iconicity of distance assumes that "the linguistic distance between expressions corresponds to the conceptual distance between them" (Haiman, 1983: 782). As an illustration, lexical causatives (e.g. *kill*) tend to convey a more direct causation than periphrastic causatives (e.g. *cause to die*). In the same vein, Mandarin multi-verbal expressions with or without a subject between two or more verb phrases could suggest different degrees of conceptual distance between them.

- (14) *Ta kai luyinji, ta changge.*
 3SG turn on the recorder, 3SG sing
 'S/he turned on the recorder and he sang.'

- (15) *Ta kai luyinji changge.*
 3SG turn on the recorder sing
 ‘S/he turned on the recorder to sing.’

In (14), the presence of the subject between the two VPs suggests a coordination interpretation rather than a purposive interpretation. It is more likely that there is no situational interdependence between these two events. However, the absence of the subject between the two VPs in (15) suggests less distance between them and a purposive interpretation is preferred in this sentence. Sharing participants is one of the necessary and important characteristics of SVCs in Mandarin Chinese.

4.3 Principle of Situational Dependence

The Principle of Situational Dependence is defined as an interdependent relationship between two VPs such as a relationship of means and aims or cause and effect. Because of the interdependence between serial verbs, verbs in such syntactic constructions are strung together in list-like fashion, one after another, but constitute a single grammatical unit. Often the information status of the constituents of the serial construction is reduced, and the separate verbs do not denote individuated events (Frawley, 1992).

- (16) *Ta meitian paobu duanlian shenti.*
 3SG everyday run exercise body
 ‘S/he runs to exercise everyday’.
- (17) *Ta meitian zaoshang mai cai shangban.*
 3SG everyday morning buy food go to work
 ‘S/he buys food and goes to work every morning’.

In identifying real SVCs, the principles of Temporal Sequence and Shared Participants are necessary, but not sufficient. In (16), the two VPs-*paobu* ‘run’ and *duanlian shenti* ‘exercise body’ bear an interdependent relationship, that is, the purpose of running is for exercising. Sentence (16) complies with the three principles proposed in this paper and thus can be rightfully called an SVC. On the other hand, sentence (17) observes the Principles of Temporal Sequence and Shared Participants in that the two VPs share an argument (the subject) and it is most likely that *mai cai* ‘buy food’ takes place before *shang ban* ‘go to work’. However, there is no situational interdependence between the two VPs, and therefore, it cannot be classified as a real SVC.

4.4 Application of the Three Semantic Principles to Multi-verb Sequences

Next, the three iconically based semantic principles will be applied to the three common types of multi-verb sequences to determine if they are real serial verb constructions or not.

Purposive constructions are typical cases of obeying the Principle of Temporal Sequence. As in the purposive construction ‘*go eat*’, the action of going happens prior to the action of eating. Causative constructions (e.g. *make him laugh*) also obey this principle in the sense that the event of causing should happen before the event of being caused. However, the perceptive constructions (e.g. *saw him laugh*) do not obey this principle quite well.

In terms of the Principle of Shared Participants, in purposive constructions the subject is shared by V1 and V2. Causative constructions and (possibly) perceptive constructions share a participant in the way that the object of V1 also functions as the subject of V2.

In purposive constructions and causative constructions, a purposive or causal relation can be held. However, such relation cannot be established in perceptive constructions.

The application of the three semantic principles indicates that purposive constructions and causative constructions abide by all the three principle, and thus are considered as real SVCs. However, perceptive constructions do not observe two of the three semantic principles. Therefore, perceptive constructions are not really SVCs and they are better to be analyzed as subordinate constructions.

Loosely, the three iconicity-based semantic principles proposed in this paper reflect whether the sequenced VPs in question share a temporal window, event participants, or reflect some other kind of conceptual unity with two phases.

5. Higher Frequency of multi-verb Sequences in Mandarin than in English

The differences in event structures and three semantic principles do not explain why there are more types of SVCs in Mandarin than in English. One reason is the difference of verb lexicalization in English and Mandarin. Mandarin is a strongly satellite language, which regularly uses its satellites to specify realization or fulfillment. Many Mandarin verbs require a satellite verb for their realization. Example (18) is entirely acceptable in Mandarin but sounds strange in English:

- (18) *Wo sha le zhu (keshi mei sha si).*
 I kill PERF pig (but not kill die)
 * 'I killed the pig but it didn't die.'
- (19) *Wo shasi le zhu.*
 I kill die PERF pig
 'I killed the pig.'

The semantics of the above examples can be explained as follows. In (18), the first clause means that I performed the action with the intention of killing the pig and the second clause in parentheses indicates that the action did not achieve the goal: success in killing the pig. However, with the confirmational satellite *si* 'die' in (19), the sentence is now an undeniable assertion that I succeeded in killing the pig.

So the English verb kill used to gloss the Mandarin verb *sha* does not really correspond in meaning. Therefore, a sentence gloss like 'I killed the pig but the pig didn't die' is really contradictory in English but thus incorrectly represents the non-paradoxical Mandarin original. The original meaning is that 'I performed the action with the intent to kill, but the pig didn't die.' English verb such as kill, open, kick are generally construed to refer to a simplex action of the fulfillment type and they specify the attainment of a certain final state (Talmy 2000, Yin 2010).

In Mandarin, the concept covered by a typical English verb such as kill is divided into two parts: the final outcome, usually conformed by a verb satellite and an action performed with the intent to lead to that outcome, which is signaled by the verb. As a result, the unitary concept of an English verb often has a counterpart in Mandarin two-part conceptualization expressed by a verb plus another verb (satellite). This is one of the important factors, which contributes to the fact that there are much more serial verb constructions in Mandarin than in English (Talmy 2000, Yin 2010).

Furthermore, the semantics of the Mandarin verb-satellite system ranges more widely than in English. Some Mandarin verbs can enter into constructions not only with resultative verbs (satellites) to indicate fulfillment, but also with those that express underfulfillment, overfulfillment, antifulfillment (Talmy 2000).

Unlike Mandarin, English generally uses one word to express action and goal such as *pull*. However, it is very common for Mandarin to use two words such as *la kai* 'pull open' to indicate action and goal respectively. As a result, VV sequences to denote action and goal are very common in Mandarin.

The fact that Mandarin has few syntactic markers or inflections is also responsible for more types of SVCs. If in Mandarin two verbs in a sentence lacks an intervening conjunction or a syntactic marker a VV structure will be created as in (20):

- (20) *Ta zhong cai mai.*
 3SG plant vegetable sell
 'He plant(s) vegetables (to) sell'.

However, with an infinitive marker in English, an SVC will not be available in this case. It should be noticed that not every VV sequence created in this way is a case of an SVC.

- (21) *Ta meitian kan shu hui ke.*
 3SG everyday read book receive visitors
 'He reads books (and) receives visitors everyday.'

Normally, there is no situational dependence between reading books and receiving visitors. Also we do not know which one of the two events happens first or they may happen more than once a day. This structure is better to be analyzed as a case of coordination.

In Mandarin, frequent pronoun dropping is quite common and it is another factor contributing to higher frequency of multi-verb sequences in Mandarin than in English. For example, if the subject in the embedded clause is omitted as in the following sentence, a string of two verbs will be formed.

- (22) *Ta chengren zuo cuo le.*
 3SG confess do wrong PERF
 'He confessed (that he) did wrong.'

6. Conclusions

Structurally similar and underspecified constructions like VV sequences display a continuum of interpretation and syntactic behavior. Both English and Mandarin have serial verb constructions. Serial verb constructions are different from typical cases of coordination and subordination mainly in event structure and profiling. In the present study, three iconically based semantic criteria are proposed to distinguish real SVCs from non-SVCs. Based on the three criteria, purposive constructions are considered to be a canonical SVC type while perceptive constructions are not a typical SVC and may be better to be analyzed as subordinate constructions. The fact that there are more types of serial verb construction in Mandarin than in English is mainly due to these three factors: (1) differences of lexicalization between English and Mandarin; (2) lacking of syntactic markers and inflections in Mandarin; (3) frequent pronoun dropping in Mandarin.

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